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# Measuring Mindful Conversational Skills for Japanese Preschool Children

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**Abstract :** In two studies, the Japanese adaptation of a scale for measuring mindful conversational competence was examined in a preschool population. Study 1 examined the reliability and validity of using the Japanese translation of Mindful conversational difficulties scale (Peterson, Garnett, Kelly, & Attwood, 2009). Cronbach's alpha indicated a good internal consistency. This scale was associated with the social skills, such as cooperation and self-control. Study 2 had a larger sample size and replicated the good internal consistency, suggesting that the current Japanese adaptation accurately reflects the original scale in terms of internal reliability and validity of social skills measurements..

**Keywords :** Conversation, theory of mind, social skills, social understanding, false belief task, Japanese

## Introduction

Social skills have been receiving more attention than ever before. This set of skills is seen as vital for everyone striving for better life experiences. Understanding the development of social skills enables us to create a better foundation for young children before they enter formal education. In a school setting, one of the challenges for many children is how well they are able to converse with other peers and classroom teachers. Before formal schooling, children's engagement in interpersonal conversations with non-family members in the setting of early childhood education and care programs creates important opportunities for developing social skills. To better facilitate and support such skills, it is important to develop tools to monitor their development.

The present study examined the adaptation of an existing tool to assess children's conversation skills in relation to social understanding such as mind-reading in everyday settings. This Mindful conversational difficulties scale was developed by Peterson et al. (2009).

This scale comprises of eight statements that

examine different daily conversational skills. It has been validated for its psychometric properties in typically developing children and Asperger Spectrum Disorder populations of school children, and a link was established between the scores derived from this scale and experimental assessments in laboratory setting, such as the false-belief task (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Further studies extended this validity by taking into account the individual differences in receptive vocabulary using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (L. Dunn & Dunn, 2007) and shy temperament (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). These findings indicate that the mindful conversational difficulties scale reflects social understanding measured in a laboratory setting and transcends language ability and personality dispositions. This scale can be very useful when direct testing with the target child is restricted.

Although social understanding is an essential part of socio-cognitive development, behaving cooperatively in accordance with socio-cultural rituals is regarded as an important social skill. Takahashi, Okada, Hoshino, and Anme (2008) developed the social skills

scale for preschoolers in a large cohort study in Japan. This social skills scale comprises of three dimensions of social skills: cooperation, self-control and assertion, though these three components are interrelated. One of the subscales, assertion is seen to have a dispositional property as it showed little change in scores from ages 4 to 6 years old (Takahashi et al., 2008). In terms of the development of social skills, cooperation and self-control are the main sub-areas that supplement social conversational skills.

How well the mindful conversational difficulties scale links with more general social skills is the interest of the present study. Existing studies used this scale to assess primary school children. However, social understanding develops long before children enter school (Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla, & Youngblade, 1991). To facilitate younger children's social skills at earlier ages, it is useful to know if the mindful conversational difficulties scale can be used for preschool children. To this end, we conducted two studies to examine the Japanese adaptation of the mindful conversational difficulties scale in relation to the preschool social skills scale (Takahashi et al., 2008).

## Study 1

### Method

#### *Participants*

Thirty-four children (20 girls,  $M=72.29$  months,  $SD = 3.29$ ) participated in the study. They were also participating in a larger study that measured different aspects of social understanding. Informed consent was obtained from their parents.

#### *Materials*

Mindful conversational difficulties scale (Peterson et al., 2009)

The original descriptions used in the scale were translated into Japanese. The Japanese descriptions were then back translated by Japanese-English bilinguals. These were compared with the original descriptions and minor wording adjustments were made before finalising the test version of the scale. A five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very

often) was used to rate how often each child displayed the target behaviours, in comparison with a standard child, who was rated as 3.

Social skill scales for preschoolers (Takahashi et al., 2008)

This social skills scale comprises of three subsets. The two sub-sets, cooperation and self-control, were used in this study to examine the association with the Mindful conversational difficulties scale. A three-point Likert scale was used to rate how often the target behaviours are observed (0: never; 1: sometimes; and 2: often).

#### *Procedures*

Following the briefing session for rating the Mindful conversational difficulties scale and Social skills scale for preschoolers, the classroom teacher rated each child on each of these scales.

### Results

Descriptive statistics for the Mindful conversational difficulties scale are presented in Table 1. Investigations of skewness for each item indicated that scores were distributed approximately symmetrical. Table 2 indicates the correlation coefficients between each scale item and the social skills scores for the two subsets. Most of the items in the Mindful conversational difficulties scale correlated significantly with the subsets of social skills, with few exceptions: cooperation did not correlated significantly with those items that are related to flexibility in conversational contents (MC3) and adjusting conversational styles to a partner (MC8). Self-control did not correlated significantly with ways of adjusting conversational styles to a partner (MC8). To examine the internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was calculated. The Cronbach's alpha of .88 indicated a high internal consistency, suggesting that the scale is reliable (Taber, 2018). Thus these 8 items were totaled to derive a single Mindful conversational difficulties score. As the current study transformed higher scores for higher competence, it was intended to show positive correlations, if any. The Mindful conversational difficulties score correlated

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the Mindful conversational difficulties scale.

	Min.	Max.	M	SD
MC1. お友達や先生など、自分以外の人が考えていることを理解していない	2.00	5.00	3.35	0.92
MC2. あなたがいない場面での出来事（例、家での出来事など）も、あなたが当然知っていると思ってしまう	3.00	5.00	4.12	0.84
MC3. 話し相手（お友達、先生）に合わせて話し方を適切にかえることができる	1.00	5.00	3.44	0.99
MC4. 相手の声色や表情から気持ちを察することができる	2.00	5.00	4.03	0.97
MC5. 話題がころころ変わるので、聞き手が混乱させられることがある	2.00	5.00	3.82	1.00
MC6. 自分の考えを言葉でうまく表すことができない	1.00	5.00	3.76	1.07
MC7. 通常、相手の話に興味をもちめすことができない	2.00	5.00	4.03	1.00
MC8. 自分の考えていることや話題に柔軟性がない	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.17
Total	19.00	38.00	29.53	5.90

Note: All the responses except for MC3 and MC4 were reversed so that higher conversational competence is indicated by a larger score.

significantly with cooperation ( $r = .50, p = .003$ ) and with self-control ( $r = .56, p = .001$ ).

## Discussion

The present study examined the Japanese adaptation of the Mindful conversational difficulties scale (Peterson et al., 2009) for preschool children. Most of the teacher ratings of this scale's items correlated significantly with the existing social skills scale for Japanese preschoolers, and these 8 items showed high internal consistency. High correlation coefficients between this score and the subsets of social skills scores: cooperation and self-control also indicates that the current Japanese adaptation of Mindful conversational difficulties scale is valid to use for rating Japanese preschool children. However, the present study only rated the scale for a very small number of children. For this reason, Study 2 examined how well this scale could reproduce similar results with a larger sample size.

## Study 2

### Method

#### Participants

50 children (23 girls,  $M=73.04$  months,  $SD = 3.04$ ) drawn from a different cohort to Study 1 participated in Study 2.

#### Materials and procedures

The materials and procedures were same as for Study 1 except that no rating was made for the social skills scale. Two classroom teachers rated the children in their classes.

### Results

The teacher ratings for the Mindful conversational difficulties scale were analysed for their internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha was .90, which indicates that the scale is reliable (Taber, 2018). The mean and standard deviation for this score were  $M=26.94$ , and  $SD = 6.77$ . The Mindful conversational difficulties score in Study 2 did not differ from that of Study 1:  $t(83) = 1.82, p = .073$ .

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between social skills subset scales and each item of the Mindful conversational difficulties scale.

		Social skills for pre-schoolers	
		Cooperation (Alpha =.90)	Self-control (Alpha = .82)
	M(SD)	12.35 (5.05)	16.56 (2.4)
Mindful communication difficulties scale	MC1	.345*	.568**
	MC2	.494**	.460**
	MC3	.162	.135
	MC4	.438**	.579**
	MC5	.505**	.409*
	MC6	.451**	.029
	MC7	.526**	.397*
	MC8	.099	.763**

## Discussion

The two studies examined the Japanese adaptation of the Mindful conversational difficulties scale (Peterson et al., 2009) in a preschool population. Internal consistency indicated that the scale is reliable. For validity, the Mindful conversational difficulties scale were correlated significantly with social skills subset scales: cooperation and self-control. These links also suggest that the Mindful conversational difficulties scale measures some aspects of social skills. The present study did not include one of the subsets of social skills scale, assertiveness, because this subset included items that have been reported to have low factor loadings and did not reflect developmental changes in the preschool years in the previous study (Takahashi et al., 2008). The assertiveness subset measures a basic level of self-expressiveness in social interaction such as using names and greetings, thus this subset may not reflect the progression of social conversations. The Mindful conversational difficulties scale allows researchers to measure a more sophisticated level of social skills in conversations for the preschoolers. Developmental literature indicates that social understanding begins at much younger ages (J. Dunn

et al., 1991) and an increasing number of young children are attending Early Childhood Education and Care programs (Balladares & Kankaraš, 2020), a scale like this can be a useful tool for early years educators in understanding individual differences and to provide support for children's socio-cognitive development.

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# 幼児の日本語会話スキルの測定

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## 要 旨

本研究は、幼児の会話スキルを測定するツールとして、欧米で開発された尺度（Mindful conversational difficulties scale (Peterson et al., 2009)）の日本語への適応についての試みを行った。翻訳した日本語版の内的信頼性と妥当性について、幼児の社会スキル指標との関連性から検討を行った。欧米では、これまでに小学生を対象として用いられた会話スキル尺度の研究報告があるが、幼児への適用については報告がない。本研究では日本の幼児においてクラス担任の評定は社会的スキルとの高い関連性がみとめられるとともに、十分な内的信頼性が得られたことから、幼児への適応の可能性が広がったといえる。

キーワード：会話、心の理論、社会的スキル、誤信念課題、日本語